"DON'T YOU DARE TO REFUSE! IT'S FOR THE GOOD OF THE HOSPITAL"

JULIET AND THE NURSE

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ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE BREHM

MISS McALISTER, in charge of the surgical ward of the Elliott Hospital, knew very accurately, from many years of experience, what to expect with the coming of spring. It meant to her the necessity of open windows letting in the yell of the city, raised an octave in pitch and swollen fivefold in volume. It meant the beginning of warm nights that brought neither rest nor refreshment to sick and fretful patients. It meant the return of bawling street-venders. Above all, it meant clouds of microbe-laden dust sifting in from the dirty, wind-harried streets. This last item alone necessitated double work, since antiseptic precautions, already as painstaking as possible, must somehow be made a hundred times more careful.

The season of returning warmth still further vexed the gaunt, ambitious nurse, absorbed heart and soul in her profession, by noticeably slackening the discipline among the younger members of the hospital staff. This meant a correspondingly greater vigilance for those of the doctors and nurses who, like herself, had grown gray in the service.

She was therefore horrified, early in April, when the chief ordered her off hospital duty. The habit of unquestioning obedience to doctors tied her tongue, but her face must have shown her consternation, for the old surgeon said peremptorily:

"Don't you dare to refuse! It's for the good of the hospital. Besides, I have a case for you."

At the mention of work, Miss McAlister's small, deep-set eyes brightened.

"If there's a case—" she began.

The doctor laughed.

"I know how to reach a dour old fanatic of a work-horse, don't I? Yes, there's a case—a case for a nurse like you to handle blindfold, with one hand tied behind your back. Did you ever hear of the Alexanders?"

Miss McAlister shook her head. For years she had known nothing of the world outside the glistening walls of the hospital corridors.

The doctor placed the Alexanders in their pigeonhole with a rapid catchword or two.

"Old family—rich as mud—exclusive society folks — no constitutions — tubercular predisposition, like so many old city families. The case is a daughter—usual nervous, idle young lady — nothing the matter with her, that I can see, but the good-for-nothingness of the younger generation."

"Too much society," the nurse diagnosed confidently.

"No, I guess not in this case. She never took any interest in society. Very unlike the other big, handsome daughters—queer and little and shy. Evidently a great puzzle and disappointment to the parents. I guess she thinks she has ideas or something—religious, maybe—the sort we get, girls who want to be nurses and give up at the first floor they have to scrub. You know the kind?"

Every grimly set muscle on Miss McAlister's square jaw indicated that she did indeed know the kind.

The doctor laughed again.

"She *has* got herself into a bad way," he admitted. "Been losing weight right along, and doesn't sleep. The family tendency to tuberculosis makes me think more of it than I otherwise should. I've told the Alexanders to send her with you up to the Green Mountains, where their summer house is." He hesitated a moment, and then went on: "I might as well tell you the whole of the business. Mrs. Alexander's brother, the girl's uncle, is old Baxter Bond, who's given the money for the new hospital on Center Street. He's the kind of philanthropic busybody, you know, who gives in order to have the fun of keeping his hand on things. I want you to have this job with his niece because it'll bring you to his attention personally, and there's no doubt it'll settle the matter of your being head nurse of his new hospital."

Miss McAlister gave a great gasp at this dazzling news, and flushed darkly.

"Oh!" she cried. "*Oh,* I can't believe it!"

The doctor smiled at her beatitude.

"But suppose I can't help his niece?" she queried anxiously.

The doctor snapped his fingers.

"Help her? There's nothing the matter with her. You'll make her over in a month, I'll warrant you! Give her raw eggs and red meat, make her go to bed early and get out of doors. No medicine's needed. Probably the change of air will be all that's necessary. Oh, do anything you please to her!"

II

USED as she was to the typical nervous invalid, with her ego as swollen as her body is wasted, the big-boned, powerful nurse found her new patient startlingly easy to handle. Juliet Alexander ate docilely what was given her, submitted to every variety of massage with the utmost resignation, walked out whenever she was summoned, went to bed at night and got up in the morning at any hour Miss McAlister set.

And she grew weaker day by day. The plain folk of the village, who, in their inexpressive way, seemed fond of the slender, dark little creature, were shocked into outspoken anxiety by her pallor and listlessness.

Never in all her experience had the nurse's professional pride been so piqued. Grasping the marshal's baton of absolute authority — that "complete charge of the case" so coveted by trained nurses, with no doctor over her to blame for the lack of results—she was at her wits' end by the close of the first week. There were moments when she gazed at her gentle, drooping little charge in a maze of conjecture so intense that it was not to be distinguished from exasperation at the girl's failure to respond to the usual therapeutic devices.

No help in unraveling the enigma was to be had from Juliet herself, for she persisted in saying that she was not ill—that there was nothing the matter with her. No, her back didn't ache, nor did she have that full feeling after eating. She was never faint—"only tired," she said one day after a long inquisition, her sensitive mouth quivering, "Yes, tired all the time."

The nurse told herself irritably, that night, that she would rather have ten honest battles with pneumonia or typhoid, where there was something to strike at, than this aimless fumbling in the dark. She felt unsettled and uneasy, like a well-trained army disorganized before a new method of warfare. She could not concentrate with her usual firm mastery of herself on a case where there seemed nothing to do.

With more leisure than ever before in her life, she had less to occupy her thoughts—nothing but the inexplicably stricken young

thing whom she could not help, and the silent radiance of the slowly advancing spring. She felt, as she put it to herself, "queer"!

It was a part of her daily program to take Juliet out for several short walks, and these loitering excursions had a strangely disquieting effect upon her own usually insensitive nerves. Her patient's weakness often forced them to sit down for long rests, the hushed stillness of which was an inconceivably new sensation for the city-bred working woman. She busied herself as much as possible over the comfort of her charge, arranging her folding chair out of the wind and in the sun, spreading a wrap over her knees, and making sure that her feet were warm and dry; but prolong as she might this pretense of occupation, it lasted but a few moments, and left her to fold her large, competent hands in a disconcerting idleness.

There was nothing to do but to sit quiet, helplessly played upon by a thousand unknown influences of sun-warmed calms and sudden pungent breezes. After a few moments of this listening silence, the soft, insistent, upward thrust of awakening life was almost like a visible movement in everything about her. The filmy drapery rapidly veiling the white birches over her head; the big, limp leaves of the moose-wood, drooping as they first unfolded, then stiffening into firmness under the lusty sunshine; the ball-like fronds of fern uncoiling and straightening like little pointing fingers—all these took hold of her as they grew, and something within her seemed to unfold and expand with them.

At times, when the light, shifting breeze held its breath entirely, and the sun poured out its full ardor, all the faint forest noises and movements blended into a significant silence. All the innumerable variations on the theme of surging growth settled into a great hush, through which life itself seemed to vibrate.

"WHAT KIND OF A MAN IS YOUR UNCLE BAXTER BOND?"

After such brooding pauses, the gray-haired woman came to herself with a start, like a person aroused from a hypnotic trance, aware that she could give no account of her thoughts. She always found her charge sitting in patient dejection, her sleek, dark head hanging heavily, her pale, pinched little face vacant and absent—an intolerable discord in the radiant forest world.

The nurse felt a sort of ecstasy of irritation at her helplessness. With the impulse born of a lifelong dependence on physical phenomena, she went around and around the circle of strengthening devices that could be

applied, only to give up, baffled. There was not one which she had not tried and which had not failed.

Toward the end of the month, her perplexity, her unrest, and the strange, stirring ferment within her grew so intense that one night she was kept from sleep. She lay awake a long time, listening to the sonorous duet between the pines over the house and the brimming river in the valley singing in its stony bed.

Finally she decided to give a professional color to her insomnia by pretending to see that her charge was well covered. She found the bedclothes tucked in firmly, just as she had left them after the alcohol rub, which was the last of her futile daily services. Apparently the girl was sound asleep, for she did not stir as the nurse's hand brushed over the slender body, lying straight and stark under the blankets. Indeed, her immobility was so profound that at the door the nurse, though drilled to the marrow of her bones against nervous fancies, hesitated, shivered, and turned back to strike a light.

As the match sputtered into flame, she saw that the girl was wide-awake, her dark head turned slightly on the pillow, her wide black eyes looking steadily out from a fathomless misery.

In the great start which the nurse gave, the match dropped from her fingers and went out. The light had lasted no longer than a heart-beat, but things were never the same for the nurse after what it had shown her. The consuming passion for healing, the one emotion of her life, flared up in her like a torch. She ran forward, groping, hurrying, and crying out in a voice not her own, a voice of anguished compassion:

"Oh! Oh! *Oh!*"

She found the bed, and drew the rigid little figure into her arms. She said nothing now, but she tightened her clasp as if she would never loosen it again. There was an instant's silence, in which the song of the river rose clearly into the night.

Then the girl's long, obstinate dumbness gave way. She began to sob, and put her face down on the other's shoulder.

"I can't forget him!" she said, as if continuing a talk already begun. "I've tried and tried—"

The nurse did not speak, but the girl went on, as if in answer: "I think about him all the time. I can't help it!" And finally, shivering, her teeth chattering, her little hands like ice, "He k-kissed me once!" she whispered piteously. "I *can't* forget him!"

III

Miss McAlister leaned over the railing of the bridge, the early May sunshine hot on her back, and watched the sunlit water flicker by. The train was not due for an hour, so that she would have time to think of many things, she reflected, glancing down the hill toward the station, and trying to bring her mind to its usual decisive activity.

There were enough things to think of, in all conscience! She had not slept for three nights, so insistently had the complications without and within her demanded a settlement. Yet now, when the very climax of perplexity was upon her, she found that her anxiety melted away in a vague, absent lethargy under the warmth of the sun and the monotonous chatter of the little river.

The train would arrive in twenty minutes, and she had come no nearer to a decision about her action than during the weltering uncertainty of the last four days. She could not think there, she decided impatiently, where the sun shone on the river and in her eyes. It was inducing self-hypnosis, she explained to herself with technical exactitude, as she moved away a few steps, and, taking a letter out of the pocket of her apron, read part of it aloud, with deliberate insistence on her own attention.

> The question came up in a talk with Mr. Baxter Bond to-day, and I sounded him judiciously, mentioned your name, and called to his attention the fact that you are with his niece. He seemed most favorably impressed with your record, and said he was glad to know that Miss Alexander is with a woman of your firmness of character, who would allow no nonsense. I fancy from his manner that she is, just now, in his bad books. The matter of the head nurse was not settled. Pressure is being brought to bear on him to appoint one of the nurses from the Standford Hospital, but I think we shall win out.

The nurse dropped the hand with the letter in it to her side, and, fixing her eyes on the road, prepared at last to do her long-delayed clear and definite thinking. She stood quite still, her head bent, her lips compressed; but when the train whistled, she gave a sigh of perplexity.

"I have no information," she said, looking down toward the station; "nothing to go on, until I have talked with him."

The train came in, its rattling clangor echoing from the hills, dropped a man with

a suit-case, and clattered away. The newcomer inquired his way of the station-agent, and started plodding up the steep incline toward the bridge. All that the woman could see was that he was strongly built and young, and finally that he was dark; for half-way up he stopped to draw breath, and took off his hat to fan himself, showing a dark head and a face which even at that distance looked tanned.

When he put his hat on and began to walk forward again, he took the other side of the road. Looking up, he saw the white-capped, white-uniformed nurse standing above him. He stopped short for an instant, staring, and then, dropping his burden, he began to bound up the hill with long strides, running with a staglike lightness which the woman, steeped in experience with weakness and deformity, caught her breath to see.

He was upon her in a moment, frightening her by his headlong rush.

"Is she worse? Is she worse?"

"No! No!" she reassured him hastily, looking wonderingly at his tense young face.

He leaned against the rail, relaxed, relieved, breathing quickly, and now remembered to take off his hat.

"Seeing you come to meet me gave me a turn," he explained. "I thought perhaps she—"

"No," said the nurse again, "she's not worse. I came to meet you because she doesn't know you are coming. She doesn't know I telegraphed. She doesn't know anything about it. Nobody knows. I did it on my own responsibility."

"Am I not to see her even now?" he asked desperately.

"That depends," said Miss McAlister dryly. "If you do, it will be as a casual caller only. You're East on business, and happened to drop in."

He began to voice the defiant disappointment that he looked, but was halted by the fury of mute interrogation in the other's eyes as she gazed at him. The color came up in his brown cheek under this scrutiny, but he faced her honestly, his mouth firm under the close-clipped mustache. He looked older than she had thought him at first, and her nurse's eye kindled at the clear purity of his tanned skin, the vigor of his poise, the breadth of his arching chest, and the strong column of his muscular neck.

"Well," he said finally, "why did you telegraph?"

She answered with another question which burst from her:

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded impulsively. "Why don't they want her to marry you?"

His answer cleared the litter of conventional preambles with a bound, and swept her along at as rapid a pace as her question had set.

"No reason that's worth considering," he said with quiet confidence. "I'm an impossible. I'm a farmer. I live in Kansas. I have no social position, and don't want to have any. My father was a blacksmith. My name is Perkins. I was never even properly introduced to her."

"Yes, yes, she told me about meeting you when she was West for her health."

"Did she tell you that she was well, absolutely well out there in God's country, without a trace of that cursed disease her city-bred ancestors saddled her with? Did she tell you how strong she grew — how rosy? How she could ride with me? How she—"

He stopped, frowning at his inability to control his trembling voice.

"Yes," said the nurse. "I know all that she has to tell."

There was a pause, the two facing each other unwinkingly in the strong sunshine—the grim, elderly woman, and the young man with the glowing face. She broke the silence with another blunt question, looking at his well-fitting clothes and shapely hat.

"Are you so very poor?"

He seemed at home in this unceremonious give and take.

"I'm not poor at all," he said steadily, "though I haven't a hundredth part of *their* money, of course. My fence runs around a thousand acres of the best land in the Kaw Valley, and I own two motor-cars."

The nurse shot another bullet-like query at him.

"Are you well? Clean, I mean—sound, decent?"

He looked at her in a quick, dark wrath.

"Would I be wanting to marry her if I were not? Look at me!"

The letter in the nurse's hand crackled as she closed her fingers on it tensely. She challenged him with a hidden exasperation.

"What in Heaven's name are you waiting for? Why don't you make her marry you? You could!"

For a moment he looked as if he would not stoop even to explain. Then he said:

"I'm not a cave-man. I don't want to make her do what she doesn't want to."

"She will have none of the Alexander money."

The man made an inarticulate sound of disgust.

"She has no strength of character, you know," the nurse went on, "or she wouldn't have given in to them. She is of age; she could do what she pleased if she were not as weak as water."

The man's strong face softened almost miraculously.

"I know all about her," he said under his breath. "I know all about her!"

The nurse looked at him keenly.

"And you are in love with her? You want to marry her?"

His self-possession gave way with a groan.

"Oh, good God!" he cried, and bent his face in his arms on the railing of the bridge.

The woman stood gazing at him almost absently, moving the hand which held the letter up and down, as if she were weighing it. A wandering breeze brought the odor of apple-blossoms to them, and the smell of moist earth from a freshly up-turned field near by.

Miss McAlister put the letter in her pocket with a sigh of uncertainty, and roused herself from her reverie.

"Well," she said neutrally, beginning to walk along the road, "we might as well see how she takes having you here!"

IV

Miss McAlister was having the first outdoor picnic supper of her life. She sat, rather stiffly, on a steamer-rug thrown over a convenient boulder. Not far away a fire leaped and crackled. Above her, through the delicate tracery of the tall white birches, the stars were beginning to assemble. The first hint of twilight hung in the branches like a transparent mist.

There rose to the nostrils of the silent, gray-haired woman, for whom iodoform had been almost the only perfume, an incense compounded of many odors — the savory smell of frying bacon, clean, pungent wood-smoke, wet moss, pine-needles, and a whiff of coffee. In her ears sounded the dreamy trickle of a near-by brook, faint, far-away, sleepy bird-notes, and the laughing chatter of two young voices.

Juliet Alexander came running to her, breathless, a piece of birch-bark in her hand.

"All ready! You must eat it while it's hot and crisp, you know. Put it on your bread and crunch it down—quick, quick, the way we used to on our picnics out West! Oh, it's so good that way!"

She stood over the older woman to make sure that the bacon was properly consumed, laughing and turning her head toward the fire with quick, bird-like motions to report the nurse's progress.

"She's doing splendidly, Miss McAlister is! You'd never dream she's always eaten off a plate before, poor thing! There!"

She snatched the birch-bark and darted back to the fire for a fresh supply.

"Oh, how heavenly that coffee smells!" she cried, laughing for no cause and craning her neck over the pot. "I can't wait!"

The man sitting on his heels before the fire looked up at her, smiling at her eagerness. The elderly woman on the fallen log caught the expression on his dark, ardent face, and shut her eyes, drawing in her breath sharply.

"No, eat your own supper now," she said when the girl came back to her again. "I've had all I care for. I want to sit here quietly and rest. The long walk has tired me. Aren't you tired?"

"Tired?" cried Juliet. "Never!"

She looked down at the other, smiling brilliantly, her eyes wide and dark. Miss McAlister was aware that the girl did not see what was before her, did not know what she was saying, could not have told where she was.

She herself lost a little of her usual trained and firm grasp on reality during the next half-hour, while the other two ate their supper, and she sat outside the golden circle of the firelight, the clean, clear twilight falling about her. At times everything wavered mistily before her. As the voices of the other two dropped from gay lightness to murmuring question and answer, she could not distinguish them from the whispering talk of the brook.

After a time the girl came and sat down at her feet.

"He's gone to get some dry wood for a big camp-fire," she explained, drawing a long breath, and nestling close to the other's knees.

Neither spoke for some time. Then Miss McAlister said irrelevantly:

"What kind of a man is your Uncle Baxter Bond?"

The girl stirred a little.

"Oh, a hot-tempered old gentleman, who's awfully good to you if you do what he likes, and smashes the furniture if you don't." Her absorption in her own dreams was not so great that she allowed this rejoinder to be the only recognition of the topic introduced by the nurse. She roused herself to a vaguely polite inquiry. "Did you ask because you are going to have something to do with him? Hasn't he given a lot of money to a hospital lately? Or was that to a fund for the study of fish life?"

Miss McAlister took a letter out of her pocket, and made as if to offer it to her companion; but after an instant's hesitation, with a long indrawn breath, she put it back, and answered:

"Well, I *was* considering an offer I had to-day from—"

Juliet's thoughts were so frankly absent that she did not finish the sentence.

Another long pause ensued, filled with low, faint night-noises.

When the older woman finally broke the silence again, the dusk had quite fallen, and the expression of her face could not be seen. Her voice was clear and matter-of-fact, as if she was recommending a warmer wrap or a change of diet.

"I guess you'd better marry him," she said.

The girl began to shake violently.

"How can I?" she cried. "I'm not thinking about it these days! I'm only living and being happy, and forgetting it can't last."

"Why can't it last?" asked Miss McAlister evenly.

"Oh, you don't know them! They wouldn't let me! Mother gets so angry when I—they'd *never* let me! Uncle Baxter said that—"

"Never mind what your Uncle Baxter said!" the nurse broke in with some heat. "Leave your Uncle Baxter out of it, please! You're old enough to marry as you like. Why don't you?"

The girl started to her knees with a shocked exclamation.

"Oh, Miss McAlister, you don't mean—*without* their letting me? All alone? With nobody at the wedding?"

The lean, long-armed woman gave her an impatient shake.

"Good Heavens, you to have a grown man in love with you!"

Without warning, the girl burst into a passion of hysteric tears.

"I don't dare! I am afraid! I can't bear to have him go away, and yet— Oh, I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do! I don't know what to—"

Miss McAlister's voice rang out with peremptory decision. For the first time since she left the hospital, her old professional manner of assured authority returned to her. She might have been ordering a delirious patient to submit to a dose of medicine.

"Then I will tell you what to do," she said unhesitatingly. "You shall marry him to-morrow, here, in the dress you have on. I will go to the wedding; and when you have gone away with him, I will return to the city, and see your father and your mother—and your Uncle Baxter—and I will tell them all about it. I shall say that it was a proper wedding, with a minister and flowers; and I shall tell them that I made you do it, because it was my professional duty, and because it was the right thing for you to do."

The girl flung herself on the other's flat breast, laughing and sobbing, embracing her, choking, and trying in vain to speak coherently.

"Oh, if you would! If you'd tell them for me! If I didn't have to see them! If you *would!*"

"I will," said Miss McAlister a little dryly. "And now here comes your—"

At the sound of his approach, the girl sprang up with a great frightened bound, and fled off among the birches. The man paused, startled.

"Didn't I see—" he began, throwing down his armful of wood and looking after the shimmer of her white dress. "Wasn't that Juliet?"

The nurse cleared her throat.

"You'd better go after her," she said, but her voice broke on the words.

He whirled on her.

"Do you mean— *Oh!*" he cried, and was gone.

The elderly woman with the pockmarked face sat quite still, listening. There was no sound but the faint stirring of a breeze in the branches above her and the dreamy trickle of the little brook, which sounded like whispering voices.

After a time the dying fire flickered up and fell together, purring and sending up coils of thin white smoke. She looked at it absently, and then, getting stiffly to her feet, dropped a letter into the coals.